WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?
Program 6
Why Are You Here?
by Ernest O'Neill

What is the meaning of life? That's the title for the series of discussions we're having together at this time on the radio. What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life? Why are we here? What is your philosophy of life? That's what's really important. It is not so much what I say or what I suggest, but what you yourself think. What do you think is the meaning of life? Why do you think you're here?

Some of us think that it's too big a question to be dealt with, and yet, it seems to be the most important question to all of us. Why are we here? What's the purpose of us spending these lives eating, drinking, sleeping and working? Why are we doing it? Some of us have likened it to being on a bus traveling 80 miles per hour towards a far distant concrete wall.

We know we're going to hit it. It's going to take us maybe seventy to eighty years to hit it, but sooner or later, we're going to hit it. Yet, many of us are simply saying to each other, "Ah, let's keep on cleaning the windows on the bus. Let's keep on eating. Let's keep on drinking. Let's keep on singing. Let's keep on laughing. We know we're going to hit it, but let's get preoccupied with what we're doing in this bus."

Of course, the planet is much bigger than a bus, and it is travelling at thousands of miles per hour through space. We're going somewhere whether we like it or not." So, it does seem vitally important that we have some answer to the question, "Why are we here?" We have an answer for most of the other things we do: Why we're in our present jobs; why we're going on vacation; why we married the person we married; why we went

to the school that we went to. It's reasonable to expect that we'd carry the same logic into this cosmic question, "What is the meaning to life? Why are we here?"

Yet, many of us probably are the same as you. We say to ourselves, "Well, I mean that is a big question. I have lots of other questions that are preoccupying me now besides that question. That's a big question. It's too big for me to answer." Yet, in a way, we're answering it, aren't we? Some of us have already decided that the meaning of life for us is to establish some kind of security for ourselves.

We kind of look around the world and we see that there are four billion people in it. There are only so many resources in the world, and so much money, and so much food and shelter and clothing to go around. So, we have decided, "Well, we better get our share of the pie." So, we've committed ourselves to getting a good education and to get a good job so that we can get food, shelter and clothing so that we can have children; so that they can get a good education; so that they can get a good job; so that they can have food, shelter and clothing; so that they can have children and they can, ad infinitum.

We shared last week how futile that whole vicious cycle is because we are all haunted by people like Howard Hughes who probably accumulated more wealth than most of us will be able to do and yet he didn't finally establish security. He, you remember, died of malnutrition, a weak, thin, old man with far too much beard and with Kleenex sticking to his fingers in the hope that he would somehow avoid the infections that killed his father. We're haunted by that. Even those of us who have accumulated some stocks and shares, we realize that finally there is a grim reaper that you can't make yourself secure from. All the fighting to maintain health, and the fighting to avoid sickness and the fighting to avoid starvation finally comes to nothing.

So, those of us who are living for security find a great deal of futility in it. And we feel it in our daily life. Some of us say, "Well, yeah, that's right. There are four-billion of us in this world. I really feel I am rather unique. I do. I feel that I am different from everybody else." The interesting thing is you are different from everybody else. There's nobody quite like you. There's nobody who's ever been like you. There's nobody that will ever be like you. Even your identical twin is not like you.

We feel that, and yet, we have the frustration that nobody else seems to notice that. We feel to ourselves, "Well, why don't they notice that we're unique? Why don't they notice that we're special?" So many of us have dedicated our lives to that object of trying to get the significance, and the attention, and the recognition and the acknowledgment that we feel we ought to have. Of course, those of us who are fathers and husbands never seem to get enough of it. Those of us who are teachers or who are bosses in a company never seem to get enough attention or respect.

That gets us frustrated. We buy the right car, we buy the right clothes. Somehow, we don't seem to get the sense of worth and self-esteem that we feel we need to have. So, there's a sense of frustration even though we live for that one purpose of making ourselves important in somebody's eyes. Others of us have decided, "Well, yeah, that's true. We certainly do need security and we certainly do need significance. But, let's face it. We're here for a short time. Let's make it as happy as we can."

So, we dedicate ourselves to happiness and of course as G.K. Chesterton says, Western man does not see happiness as just excitement, excitement, excitement, because that finally would bring him into such neurotic instability that he could not stand it. He does not see happiness as the absolute peace and

unrelieved quietness of Walden Pond, because that bores him to tears. Most of us try to get a mixture of those two things. We try to raise our experiences in this life to the 'nth degree so that we will somehow have a sense of that eternal exhilaration and sense of being and existing that will give us the final satisfaction.

Some of us try to get it in the sexual act. We hope that maybe, that moment will give us a sense of eternity. After a while, that begins to pall on us and we begin to find that it doesn't give us that same excitement or the same exhilaration, or the same sense of well-being that it did before. It's the same with the alcohol. We tried the marijuana. Then we try the heroin. Then we try something else and somehow, they never seem to give us that final satisfaction that we feel we were made for.

We were made for a moment of tremendous exhilaration, a sense of being known and utterly and completely loved and understood. We sense too, that we're made to have a sense of quietness, and peace and rest. An absolute sense of well-being that we never can actually reach with all the chemically produced experiences that we've tried to get hold of. So, many of us have tried to reach that point of happiness that will make us in some sense unaware of the pedestrian futility of this petty little world in which we live. We look for that existential experience and never seem to manage to find it.

All the congeniality in the world seems to pall eventually. All the parties in the world seem to have an experience of the morning after the night before. All the so-called intimate experiences that we have with someone else physically and emotionally seem to leave us rather dissatisfied. So, many of us have come to the point in our lives where we wonder, "Is there any meaning to life at all? Is there any purpose in being here? Is there any reason worth living for that gives any meaning to it all?"

Of course, one of the problems that we have with all these attempts at answering the question, "What is the meaning of life?", is we feel that there's something missing in life itself. We feel there's something missing in the world. We have a strange feeling that Ponce de Leon was right, and that there is an elixir of life -- that if we could only get hold of it would make us utterly and absolutely happy.

We have a feeling that there is an integrated, simple answer that would give us full satisfaction in this lifetime. Yet, it seems very difficult to find it. One of the reasons why we go for the security of course is, we feel we were made for security. We feel somehow we were made for someone or something to provide security for us. We feel that in some way we are too small compared with the cosmic massiveness of the universe to get security ourselves and that somehow it needs to come from outside ourselves.

We feel the same with a sense of worth and significance. We sense a frustration in trying to establish it for ourselves. We feel there is something or some power that may be able to give us that sense of eternal value that we feel we ought to have. We feel the same with happiness. We feel that there is some experience of being known and knowing that will give us that final existential experience that will utterly satisfy us. Tomorrow, I'd like to talk about the beginnings of a possible answer to the question, "What is the meaning to life?"